**Besame mucho**



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Brooke Angus sits in a chair beside Yasmin Teja’s bed.

The music therapist strums her guitar’s strings and leans into the instrument as she hits the deep yearning notes of “Besame Mucho.” Then, slowly, Brooke begins to sing.

“Besame, besame mucho, como si fuera ésta noche la ultima vez.”

Her voice seems to make all the lines in the cream-coloured room dissolve. With every chord comes a sense of freedom, as though here, in this fuzzy cocoon, life is no longer restrained by form. Yasmin closes her eyes. Her eyelashes flutter as her thoughts ebb between the past and present. She begins to whisper.

“Besame, besame mucho.”

The Spanish tune speaks of love; passion so deep and powerful that a single kiss feels as though it may be your last. This was Yasmin and Sadrudin’s song. They grew up as neighbours in Kenya’s capital Nairobi. Their mothers helped plan the union, but it was a “love marriage.” For 41 years they planted kisses on each other, until a year ago, when Sadrudin succumbed to cancer, and they shared their last.

Here, lying among the folds of sheets on an adjustable bed in the North Shore Hospice, Yasmin awaits a similar fate. Five weeks after Sadrudin’s death, Yasmin was re-diagnosed with cancer. It started in her breast and has now reached her lymph nodes and her brain. Her hair is shorn short, a legacy of her brain surgery; her body looks bird-like when compared to the glowing woman, who stands tall beside Sadrudin in a photo tucked away carefully in her dresser.

Although the disease limits her movement to the slight twist of a wrist or beckoning of a finger, Yasmin hasn’t let it eat away at her creativity. She’s been working on a project, an endeavor she calls a “piece of herself.”

Over the past few weeks, Brooke has become an important part of Yasmin’s life. She’s helped Yasmin create a CD. The tracks feature Yasmin’s quiet voice reciting her poems in Urdu, an Indo-Aryan language. Accompanying her satiny words is Brooke’s guitar and when each soliloquy finishes, Brooke sings an English translation.

Last night Yasmin unveiled her project in her room. It is her way to thank those who have rallied around her. It was also a special moment in knowing that although she will be gone soon, her words will live on.

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For seven years, Brooke has watched the power of music unfold in front of her. Two days a week she visits Lions Gate Hospital’s palliative care patients and the North Shore Hospice. Not all patients want to create a CD like Yasmin; some simply don’t have that much time left. Some patients ask Brooke to sing or play a familiar tune. Others want to play or sing themselves. But no matter who the person is, there’s something intimate about music, Brooke says. It can create an unspoken trust, open emotional doors or ease anxiety.

Currently, Brooke is only one of approximately five full-time equivalent music therapists working for Vancouver Coastal Health. Right now she spends her time between 10 patients in hospice and seven patients at the hospital’s palliative care wing. But that number fluctuates, with as many as 30 patients registered in Lion Gate’s palliative care program.

Over the last year and a half, a gradual ellimination of music therapy jobs throughout B.C. — including one position at Lions Gate — has caught the attention of the Music Therapy Association of BC.

“It has been a growing concern,” says Meg Fildes, the association’s spokesperson. “We are tackling it right now and starting a committee about this issue.”

Recently, B.C.’s Interior lost three music therapists. The post at Lions Gate Hospital was reclassified and downgraded, Fildes notes. The bereavement manager position, a woman who also worked as a music therapist, was cut. In the past two years, St. Paul’s palliative care saw its music therapy position disappear, as did Marion Hospice. MSA Mission Memorial hospice cut eight hours from its music therapy program. On top of that, between 2002 and 2004, all music therapy jobs in cancer agencies in Vancouver, Surrey and Kelowna were eliminated.

Christian Sjonnesen is one of the Interior music therapists who found himself faced with a 30-day notice this spring. After six and a half years working in an Interior Health Authority extended care facility — Polson Residential — Sjonnesen says he was told by management that his six-hour-a-week job would be taken over by volunteers.

Sjonnesen attended Capilano University, the only post-secondary education institution in Western Canada that teaches music therapy, to receive his bachelor’s degree.

“The health care system is so administrative heavy there is no money for professionals,” he says.

Once music therapy positions are axed it is only a small step for health authorities to strip other therapy resources, such as recreation therapists, from hospitals, hospices and residential facilities, Sjonnesen warns. He’s written to Premier Christy Clark and hopes public attention will help save jobs.

“I would like to see music therapists reinstated where they were cancelled,” he says. “We are taking quality of life of residents.”

The number of music therapy positions in Vancouver Coastal Health has been steady over the years, says Gavin Wilson, VCH spokesperson. In Richmond, such jobs have increased by 0.2 per cent, he notes.

As for the LGH position, the full-time job was dropped and two part-time workers hired. This better fulfills patients needs, allowing staff to cover a broader time spectrum, Wilson says.

“We found that [the full-time job] wasn’t meeting the needs of the clients,” he says.

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Brooke is grateful for her job. It is emotionally stirring work, she says, but also rewarding. She shares some of the most intimate moments in a persons life. “It is so moving these people can invite me into their room when they don’t have a lot of time left,” she says.

After The Outlook’s interview, Brooke and Yasmin recorded four more poems, including one Yasmin wrote for her mother and another for her father., Khanum Schmitz.

Yasmin’s sister-in-law, who has been by Yasmin’s side since her diagnosis, says it was amazing to watch Yasmin recite them from memory. Yasmin and Khanum have always had a close relationship. When Khanums brother was alive, the three would often vacation together. Now she says they are closer than sisters.

And every Thursday, the day Brooke visits Yasmin, Khanum finds joy in watching Yasmin’s face spring to life. It’s helped Khanum mourn the loss of her brother and the impending loss of a dear friend.

“It is very special to me to finally have Yasmin’s poetry so other people can hear it,” she says.

Yasmin needed to get her words out before she could move on. Making the CD has brought her joy and strength. Khanum knows how this story will end, but its been a beautiful journey, she says.

“I take something from everything. Life is very precious and I believe the meaning of life is all about relationships.”

“Besame, besame mucho como si fuera ésta noche la ultima vez.”  Kiss me, kiss me a lot, as if tonight was the last time.

**LIFE**

*Those that dwell on prayers, life is an excuse for them*

*Those that dwell on women, life is hell for them*

*Those that dwell on money, life is a fix for them*

*But it is those that dwell on the laughter of little children,*

*On the fragrance of flowers and the ocean breeze*

*They are the living. Life is life for them*

During my time at North Shore Hopsice, I had occasion to meet with several wonderful people who have been so helpful in making this project possible. I especially like to acknowledge Brooke Angus, music therapist at NSH, who put music to my lyrics and much more.

Marylene Kyriazis, the pharmacist, who introduced artist Andrea Argyros to me, who did the artwork for the CD cover. Beyond all I want to acknowledge my sister-in-law, Khanum Schmitz, whom I love very much. She has been there for me in so many, many ways since the onset of my illness and to whom I dedicate my CD.

*-Yasmin Teja*